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Extremism and the Insider Threat to the DoD

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INTENT

This white paper is designed to provide analysis of relevant, publicly available information on threat and hazard events/trends and their potential impacts to the interests of the United States, both at home and abroad. This product is not intended to be an all-encompassing assessment of the subject.



Extremism and the Insider Threat to the DoD

Introduction

In recent years, a number of U.S. military members have been found to have engaged in extremist activities, to include participation in far-right and Islamic extremist groups, among other ideologies. This paper does not seek to argue that the U.S. military is currently experiencing an extraordinary problem with extremism in the ranks. Rather, this paper seeks to explore the current state of the insider threat to the DoD from various extremist groups/ideologies based on the available reporting, to include polls/surveys and a number of case studies. It should also be noted that there is a notable lack of official information regarding extremism in the ranks due in part to inherent difficulties in defining and quantifying what constitutes extremist activity.

DoD-Specific Extremism Concerns

The presence of extremists in the military can stem from many sources. Some people may become extremists while active members of the military, others radicalize prior to joining. In either case, the extremist may seek to target the DoD or utilize their membership to gain skills, access to weapons and information, and recruit other members of the DoD. According to a 1998 study commissioned by the Department of Defense, "Young civilian extremists are encouraged by adult leaders to enlist in the military to gain access to weapons, training, and other military personnel."¹ The presence of extremists creates vulnerabilities to theft, potential for violence, insider attacks, information gathering for domestic or foreign entities, and can be detrimental to the morale and cohesion of the DoD. In this paper, only issues raised by the presence of extremists in active duty will be examined. Veterans are not immune to such issues but will not be included in this discussion for the purpose of brevity.

The issue of potential extremism in the ranks was recently thrown into the national spotlight when at least two people serving in the military (along with a number of veterans) were among those who stormed the U.S. Capitol Building on 6 January. Additional investigations into other potential active duty servicemembers are currently ongoing.^{2,3} Following this, as national preparations for the inauguration and new administration began in January, there was an increased focus on vetting military members to find potential insider threats. Twelve National Guard members were removed from duties related to the inauguration.⁴ These removals were a direct result of additional vetting from the FBI of all 25,000 National Guard troops coming into Washington D.C. for the event. The aim of the FBI was to identify and combat internal cases of white supremacy and other far-right extremism that may present an insider threat.⁵

One particular challenge faced by the DoD is the lack of information present on the topic of extremism in the military. Only two studies have been commissioned to look at this problem specifically. One stemmed from a task force in 1996, surveying active-duty Army.⁶ The other was completed in 1999 and focused on the Air National Guard. Both surveys were held following a 1995 incident in which three white soldiers were charged with killing a black man and woman outside Fort Bragg, North Carolina.⁷ Currently the Defense Department has no central tracking of



allegations or disciplinary actions related to extremism. In 2020 the Pentagon reported from 2015 to 2020, 21 service members had been disciplined or discharged for extremist activities. Utilizing open-source research and tracking news articles has shown more than 21 such incidents each of the years. As such, experts doubt the accuracy of the Pentagon's report.³

Forms of Extremism Within DoD

Extremism in the DoD can be seen in many forms and variations. Levels of extremism and motivation for action can also vary from case to case. Far-right extremism and Islamic extremism receive a particular focus in this paper due to the track record of plots, attacks, and activities perpetrated by adherents of the ideologies in recent years, to include DoD personnel. However, potential threats to the DoD can emanate from a number of other extremist ideologies, which will be examined below.

Far-Right Extremist Groups

The broad types of right-wing extremist individuals and networks in the United States include white supremacists, anti-government extremists, militia groups, neo-Nazis, and incels (a misogynist ideology commonly associated with the far-right). There are numerous differences between (and even within) these types, such as ideology, capabilities, tactics, and level of threat. Adherents also tend to blend elements from each category.⁸ Right-wing attacks and plots account for the majority of all terrorist incidents in the United States since 1994, and the total number of right-wing attacks and plots has grown significantly during the past six years.⁹ It should be noted that the use of the terms "far right" or "right wing" in the context of this paper does not seek to equate conventional right-wing political views with far-right extremism.

However, some members of the military may espouse views that indicate potential bias, prejudice, and/or racism without identifying as far-right. A 2019 survey by the Military Times found 36% of active-duty troop respondents had personally seen evidence of white supremacist and racist ideologies in the military. This is a steep increase as compared to 22% that answered affirmatively to the same question in 2018. While potential sample group bias should be noted (the survey was exclusively of Military Times subscribers) it aligns with the broader trends seen nationally.¹⁰ Per Politico, "The overall problem of right-wing extremism has dogged the military for decades and tends to be more severe when there is a rise in wider society."¹¹

Islamic Extremist Groups

Islamic extremist groups such as al-Qaeda (AQ) and the Islamic State (IS) are predominantly active overseas, though these and other groups do plot (and have successfully carried out) transnational attacks against the U.S. However, groups such as AQ and IS also pose a unique insider threat to the DoD due to their efforts to radicalize individuals abroad to commit lone wolf or small group attacks. Moreover, these groups may attempt to directly communicate with potential recruits, and may seek to direct/coordinate attacks. Groups such as AQ and IS also generally seek to target the U.S. military for retribution against overseas military operations, making DoD insiders valuable targets for recruitment and radicalization.



Other Ideologies/Groups

While previous insider extremist threats within the DoD are predominately far-right or Islamic in nature, a number of other potential extremist ideologies could be present within DoD to a lesser degree. Ideologies/groups such as “Antifa”/anti-fascist groups, anarchist extremists, animal liberation/environmental liberation advocates, black nationalist/black separatists, sovereign citizens, and groups motivated by various conspiracy theories are all potential sources of extremist violence within DoD should personnel become involved with such ideologies/groups.

However, there is limited open source reporting regarding DoD personnel being involved with these ideologies/groups. While this paper predominately focuses on far-right and radical Islamic threats, extremists espousing a number of various political and social ideologies could potentially pose a threat to the DoD and its mission.

Potential Insider Threat from Foreign Nationals

Moreover, a potential insider threat exists from foreign nationals who espouse extremist views and have authorized access to DoD installations for purposes such as joint training, contract duties, or shared bases in DoD host countries. While the potential exists for foreign national DoD insiders to espouse far-right extremist, Islamic extremist, or other extremist views as defined above, there are a number of additional terrorist/extremist groups that are unique and indigenous to countries around the world that can not be succinctly summarized for the purposes of this paper.

The 2019 shooting at Naval Air Station Pensacola perpetrated by a visiting Saudi Arabian flight student highlights the potential threat from foreign national DoD insiders. The student, who killed 3 sailors onboard the base, was reportedly in contact with members of al-Qaeda prior to his attack.¹²

Case Studies

The case studies detailed below were not selected or ordered to reflect any indication of prevalence, priority, or threat level. Rather, they were selected in order to highlight the number of extremist threats that have affected the DoD in recent years.

Order of Nine Angles Arrest

During or around the year 2019 and extending into 2020, an active duty Army soldier (identified by media reports as Ethan Melzer) stationed in Italy began communicating with members of the Order of Nine Angles (O9A).¹³ The O9A is an extremist group that began in Britain in the 1970s. There are cells worldwide operating mostly online. Its members espouse a combination of Satanic, neo-Nazi, and occult ideas, and have even expressed support for the IS. The O9A’s origins are obscured by myths circulated by the group itself, but open sources suggest it was likely founded by David Myatt, a British occultist who once led the British National Socialist Party. Myatt has denounced his extremist past, but the O9A is still active.¹⁴ In October 2019, Melzer was assigned to his unit, and in April 2020, he learned the unit would be transferring to Turkey. Melzer used an encrypted messaging service to communicate his unit’s location, movements, and other sensitive information to members of the O9A, an offshoot called “RapeWaffen Division,” and a purported Al Qaeda operative. According to the indictment, Melzer intended for members of the groups to



ambush his unit. He understood that he might be killed in such an attack and that his actions made him a traitor to the United States.¹⁵ Melzer was arrested in June 2020 by federal law enforcement.¹³ He later pled not guilty to six (6) charges, including conspiracy to kill U.S. nationals, conspiring and attempting to murder U.S. service members, and providing support to terrorists. His trial is pending.¹⁶

2009 Fort Hood Shooting

In 2009, a U.S. Army officer named Nidal Hasan opened fire at Fort Hood in Texas, killing 13 and wounding 32 others. Hasan reportedly began embracing radical Islam in the years preceding the shooting, including communicating with the al-Qaeda cleric Anwar al-Awlaki. Hasan reportedly raised a number of red flags during his time in the Army, to include “obsess[ing] over a ‘War against Islam’ he felt was being waged by the U.S.” in presentations he gave during his training. Hasan ultimately decided to commit his attack after receiving orders to deploy to Afghanistan. However, some analysts have also pointed to the death of Hasan’s mother as a contributing factor to his choice to commit violence.¹⁷ Traumatic life events can often be an indicator of a potential insider threat, especially when combined with factors such as communication with known extremists.

Christopher Hasson Arrest

In 2019, Christopher Paul Hasson (then a Lieutenant in the United States Coast Guard) was arrested on firearms and drug charges and described as a “domestic terrorist” by federal prosecutors. Hasson, a self-described white supremacist, had stockpiled over a dozen firearms and more than 1,000 rounds of ammunition, while a “target list” of Democratic politicians and media figures was discovered on his computer.¹⁸ While Hasson was apparently not an active member of any white nationalist group at the time of his arrest, he had apparently communicated with a well-known Neo-Nazi figure in 2017, in which he discussed the idea of forming a “white homeland” and using “focused violence” to achieve that goal.¹⁹ At the time of his arrest, Hasson was stationed at the Coast Guard headquarters in Washington, D.C.

January 2021 IS-Related Arrest

In January 2021, an active duty U.S. Army Soldier stationed at Fort Stewart, GA was arrested for providing material support to the Islamic State. The Soldier, identified as Cole James Bridges, reportedly shared information with an FBI investigator posing as a member of IS that sought to ambush U.S. troops in the Middle East. Bridges also reportedly “provided training and guidance to purported [IS] fighters who were planning attacks, including advice about potential targets in New York City, such as the 9/11 Memorial. Bridges also provided the [FBI investigator] with portions of a U.S. Army training manual and guidance about military combat tactics.”²⁰ Fortunately, Bridges was never in direct contact with any actual IS members, though the incident highlights the potential for military personnel to apply their military knowledge and skills to the furtherance of an extremist ideology. Furthermore, the incident highlights the persistence of the threat from IS, which has diminished in influence and territorial control in recent years.



Conclusion

At the time of publication, the Pentagon has announced a number of initiatives in order to identify and combat extremism of the ranks. The new Secretary of Defense announced a service-wide standdown in early 2021 in order to discuss extremism in the ranks, and the 2021 National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA) “established a deputy inspector general to...track supremacist, extremist or criminal gang activity,” among other duties. The 2021 NDAA also “requires the Pentagon to include questions about antisemitism, racism and white supremacy in its annual workplace climate survey.”²¹ These and other measures have highlighted the DoD’s renewed focus on combatting the extremist threat, which, as this paper has shown, remains a serious concern. While the true level of extremist activity in the ranks is not fully understood, the DoD is currently seeking to gain a clearer picture of the potential threat, which will allow for the implementation of additional measures in order to remove extremism from the services and protect the DoD’s ability to carry out its core missions.

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